

SEARLE BACK WITH VITAL EQUALISER

25/04/74

Leatherhead 1, Wycombe Wanderers 1

OUT of Rothmans Isthmian League football for no less than 23 weeks, Wycombe Wanderers centre forward Keith Searle returned to a joyous welcome at Fetcham Grove, Leatherhead on Thursday night and promptly scored Wycombe Wanderers' equaliser — a goal that could prove invaluable in the final run-in to the league championship, (writes STUART EARP).

It was a great come-back by Searle and without his services, the Blues attack would have been severely blunted. As it was, they struggled throughout the first 45 minutes and after conceding a sixth minute goal, looked decidedly nervous. They were the epitome of a side carrying all the pressures of league leadership.

If they were to take any sort of grip on the game, they needed to produce all their experience in the second half and that was exactly what they did. Better finishing could have brought them three points but in the end, I think Wycombe were well satisfied with one.

Wycombe were faced by a Leatherhead team without two of its leading players — centre half Dave Reid and striker Pete Lavers — both injured. Despite this, the home side looked far more dangerous in the first half, mainly due to unusual hesitancy in the Wanderers' defence. Too often they waited for the ball to come to them, giving the Tanners' strikers too much time and room. In midfield, passes went astray regularly and they were never able to settle into their rhythm.

It wasn't all Leatherhead during the first 45 minutes. Chances were created by Wycombe but the finishing was wayward, especially from Mick Holifield. Conditions, of course, were difficult — very difficult. Drizzle made the pitch slippery and the players had to contend with driving rain for about 20 minutes.

Mistakes were common early on and one slip by John Cooper saw Holifield cross invitingly into the home six yard box. Peter Smith, who had one game in goal for England this term, was beaten but Phil Dade cleared Steve Perrin's effort off the line.

Then in the sixth minute, Nobby Skinner broke away for a superb individual goal. Receiving the ball just inside his own half he slipped into top gear before being confronted by Paul Birdseye. The full back tried to shadow but Skinner's renowned pace took him through where he was then faced by Roger Grant, covering across. He too was beaten as Skinner ran wide and thumped in a shot which slid under 'keeper John Maskell's body and into the net.

The Blues took at least 20 minutes to settle and even then they were far from their best. Searle went close in the 26th minute and then the impressive Perrin beat stand-in centre half Alan Brazier beautifully but his cross was blasted almost over the trees behind the goal by Holifield.

A freak storm then swept over the ground and made football almost virtually impossible for a while. When it subsided however, it was Leatherhead who emerged on top with Wycombe once again allowing Skinner all the space he needed to demonstrate his talents. This time he picked up possession just on the edge of the visitors' area and was faced by Birdseye. Once more the full back refused to commit himself (even though Skinner slipped at one stage) the Leatherhead raider taking the ball to the bye-line before crossing hard and low. Only a touch was needed to knock it home but Peter McGillicuddy, who started the season at Wycombe, missed the chance to put one over his former colleagues.

For the first few minutes of the second half it seemed Wycombe were heading for further trouble. Leatherhead won a corner which Maskell failed to gather cleanly, the ball falling nicely for Derek Wells to slam in a shot. Fortunately for Wycombe, Birdseye was in the right place to clear off the line.

After that, Wanderers at last began to stamp some authority on the game. They gradually strung passes together to form attacks but at the sign of any danger, they were often halted in their tracks by niggling Leatherhead fouls.

There was an anxious moment when Mead sliced a clearance towards the corner of his own net and he must have been greatly relieved to see Maskell gather well.

Then in the 65th minute, Wanderers pulled back to 1-1, much to the relief of their supporters. Searle broke free from the defence, level with Brazier. At this point, Brazier was either fouled or slipped on the greasy surface but the referee decided on the latter and Searle clipped the ball over the advancing goalkeeper to make it 1-1.

The goal was a real tonic for Wycombe. The confidence came flooding back and thanks to Reardon and Pritchard, a firm grip was established in midfield while the two centre backs thrived on anything in the air. Holifield who must have covered every blade of grass on the pitch, was often back to make timely clearances when Leatherhead threatened.

But there were still one or two moments of worry for Wycombe. In the 82nd minute Wells drove narrowly over the top from 30 yards following a Bullock clearance. Wycombe, however, ended the match

plugging away at the Leatherhead net.

Two minutes into injury time Horseman intercepted Cooper's back pass. Goalkeeper Smith committed himself by coming way out of his area and fouling 'Bodger', but with the latter still on his feet, Wycombe, I am sure would have preferred to play on. The free kick was followed by two corners taken by Horseman and as he prepared to take a third in the 94th

minute, the referee brought this exciting game to a close.

LEATHERHEAD: P. Smith; J. Cooper, B. Webb, A. Brazier, P. Dade; D. Wells, P. McGillicuddy, D. Casey; D. Skinner, R. Fruen, C. Kelly. Sub R. Gonzales (not used).

WYCOMBE: J. Maskell; P. Birdseye, K. Mead, D. Bullock, R. Grant; L. Pritchard, T. Reardon, M. Holifield; A. Horseman, K. Searle, S. Perrin. Sub P. Wood (not used).

Half time: 1-0. **Goalscorers** Wycombe — Searle (65), Leatherhead — Skinner (6).